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RHMFISS/CDR TF FALCON
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RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000501

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: STRONG TURNOUT, RELATIVE CALM MARK LOCAL POLLS

REF: A) PRISTINA 497 AND PREVIOUS

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Kosovo's November 15 local elections, the first organized by Kosovo authorities and the first since independence, were marked by higher than expected turnout, in both the Serb community and in Kosovo at large. Voters cast ballots for mayors and municipal assembly persons in 36 municipalities, including four new Serb-majority municipalities. A raw vote count of over 3,800 votes in the newly decentralized majority-Serb municipality of Gracanica is potentially a watershed moment for Kosovo Serb participation in Kosovo institutions. Both local and international monitors (including a 100-person Embassy-led effort) generally credited the Central Elections Commission (CEC) with successful and professional organization of the polls, which were held without any major security incidents. Preliminary results will not be available until Monday, November 16, but final results are not expected for several days, in part because of the time it takes to count the many conditional ballots cast. Parties have until November 18 to file complaints with the Elections Complaints and Appeals Commission. Run-off elections for those municipalities where mayoral candidates failed to win 50 percent of the vote plus-one are scheduled for December 13. END SUMMARY

TODAY'S WINNER -- KOSOVO VOTERS...

12. (SBU) As the polls close following the first elections organized by and held in independent Kosovo, an unexpected increase in overall turnout is the surprising lead story. While many experts expected voting in these municipal polls to slide significantly in comparison to 2007, CEC reported this evening that voters cast 709,362 ballots, an unexpected increase of more than 140,000 votes over the previous election.

INCLUDING KOSOVO SERBS

13. (SBU) Greater than expected turnout was not limited to the majority Kosovo Albanian community, either. Four of the six new

majority-Serb municipalities formed under the Ahtisaari Plan's decentralization process voted for the first time on November 15 -- Gracanica, Novo Brdo, Ranilug and Klokot. In spite of procedural obstacles from Belgrade and threats to employment from parallel structures and Serbian public enterprises, Kosovo Serbs voted in refreshingly high numbers. In the new municipality of Gracanica alone, the CEC reported that more than 3,800 persons voted; this is roughly 2,000 more than voted for all Kosovo Serb parties combined in municipal elections in 2007, and about 600 more than cast ballots in the territory of Kosovo in parallel elections in Gracanica in August 2009.

OBSERVERS PRAISE ELECTION ORGANIZATION EFFORTS

¶4. (SBU) The USAID-funded local NGO coalition Democracy in Action told us following the close of polls that in their official statement later today they will report that while there were some irregularities and obstacles to voting, they did not essentially affect the results. International monitors, including the USAID-funded European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO) effort, are expected to issue similar statements November 16. The 32 teams of USG monitors who observed the polls nationwide also reported generally well-run polling places with staff that took pride in the process.

ELECTIONS TAKE PLACE WITHOUT SERIOUS INCIDENTS

¶5. (SBU) These elections took place in an atmosphere of relative calm, as well. According to EULEX logs of Kosovo Police activity during election day, there were about 10 arrests, in most cases related to the possession of firearms at polling stations or

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attempts to disrupt the voting process. Voting took place in all municipalities of Kosovo, including Leposavic, Zvecan and Zubin Potok, the three municipalities north of the Ibar. (Note: Mobile polling stations for Serb voters in northern Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, and Zvecan recorded no votes. End Note) Though a group of about 70 Kosovo Serbs assembled in Zubin Potok to protest at a mobile polling station, they were prevented from approaching the station by Kosovo Police, and dispersed without incident.

THE ROAD AHEAD

¶6. (SBU) Final results will take several days to determine and will require the counting of all conditional ballots and the resolution of all complaints made to the Electoral Complaints and Appeals Commission (ECAC). (Note: Complaints to the ECAC are due by November 18. End Note) Preliminary results will become available on November 16, and we do not expect to see certified results for at least one week. Runoff elections for mayor, in those municipalities where no candidate wins a simple majority, will take place on Sunday, December 13.

COMMENT

¶7. (SBU) Today's turnout of over 709,000 represents both an end to a decade long trend of lower and lower turnout in municipal elections, and a defeat to those forces -- like Albin Kurti's Vetevendosje Movement and Serbian parallel structures -- who actively opposed these polls. Strong Kosovo Serb turnout, at least in Gracanica and other areas south of the Ibar, is an important victory for the community and the prospects of integration. It will give new decentralized municipalities like Gracanica a legitimacy that Kosovo Serb bodies have not enjoyed in some time. While the final winners and losers are yet to be determined, and will not be determined in most cases before December 13, conventional wisdom holds that a high turnout election should benefit the party that has historically achieved the highest vote totals -- the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) of President Sejdiu and Pristina Mayor Isa Mustafa. Following LDK's strong campaign, we anticipate that the results, when released, will reflect an LDK surge. A first-round

win in Pristina, which the LDK is already claiming, could be a boon to the leadership ambitions of Mayor Isa Mustafa, and could tempt the LDK to reopen talks on coalition relations with Prime Minister Thaci's Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK). A significant surge for Thaci's PDK, with its solid, stable base of 200,000 voters, would be much more difficult to explain. END COMMENT

DELL